Summarizing an Article

In this document I demonstrate strategies for effectively presenting the main points of an article. The idea is to show clearly what those points are and how they work together to prove the thesis. This prepares you to analyze the evidence by explaining what facts support each point. That in turn prepares you to evaluate the evidence by discussing whether those facts are sufficient to prove that point, relate to that point, and are representative of the object of study.

I will use “Race and the Drug War” by Cockburn and St. Clair (Counterpunch, June 1999) as the example.

Thesis and Outline

The first step to this kind of analysis is to understand what the thesis and main points are. That is the purpose of writing the Paragraph Outline.

Here are the thesis and outline of “Race and the Drug War” that we developed during our class discussion.

Thesis: Drug war is designed to impose social control in a racially discriminatory manner.
   I. Ad reminds us that the drug war is not working (paragraphs 1-3)
   II. The drug war is deeply hypocritical (4-6)
   III. History shows that drug wars are really about social/racial control (7-10)
   IV. Crack vs. powdered cocaine shows the racism in practice (11-14)
   V. Impact of the drug laws reveals the racial disparity (15-17)

Notice that each main point is expressed as a claim: A complete statement that can, in theory, be supported with evidence. This claim acts as the thesis for that section of the article; everything in that section is devoted to proving that claim.

Summary Paragraph

A critical essay should present the main points of the article in paragraph form. The simplest version of this approach just lists the main points in individual sentences, connecting them using transitional words and phrases that show the order in which the points are presented and give some indication of the relationship among the ideas. In this sample, the main points are highlighted in green and the transitional phrases are in yellow.

Cockburn and St. Clair argue that the drug war is designed to impose social control in a racially discriminatory manner. They begin with an ad against the drug war, signed by many prominent people, which reminds us that the drug war is not working. However, they point out that many of these same people once supported the policies the ad condemns, which leads to the observation that the drug war is deeply hypocritical. Not only that, but past drug wars were really about social and racial control. The authors then return to the present to argue that sentencing differences between crack and powdered cocaine show the racism of the drug war in practice. Finally, they make the more general point that the impact of the drug laws reveals the racial disparity.
**Analytical Summary Paragraph**

A more complex or sophisticated version of this technique also indicates how each point is part of a larger argument, and that all of them together are designed to prove a single, over-arching idea: the thesis. (This is the point of step 3 in the Paragraph Outline.) In this example the main ideas are in green, the transitional phrases in yellow, and the role of each point in the larger argument is highlighted in blue. Notice that the the phrases in blue all include content-independent analytical terms—terms whose job is to describe the structure of the argument, not just the topic. Those content-independent terms have been underlined.

Cockburn and St. Clair argue that the drug war is designed to impose social control in a racially discriminatory manner. They begin with an ad against the drug war, signed by many prominent people, which reminds us that the drug war is not working—the first step in showing that it has a different purpose from what most people believe. However, they point out that many of these same people once supported the policies the ad condemns, which leads to the observation that the drug war is deeply hypocritical, introducing the idea of a hidden agenda. Not only that, but past drug wars were really about social and racial control, which provides historical support for the argument. The authors then return to the present to argue that sentencing differences between crack and powdered cocaine show the racism of the drug war in practice. Finally, they make the more general point that the impact of the drug laws reveals the racial disparity. These two points show that the drug war’s impact matches the intentions that the earlier points revealed: racial and social control.

As you can see, the analysis is a blend of content terms and content-independent terms. That blend is what helps the reader understand the way the argument is put together, and positions you to evaluate the quality of evidence used to support each of these points.